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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to show the dependence of an educational program for the maximum development of city children upon an effective communication system linking school bureaucracies and the families which they supposedly serve. The study is an empirical attempt to discover the nature of the families in a particular black ghetto in Hartford, Connecticut, and ascertain the critical factor in the decision of these families whether to accept a particular educational opportunity for their children, which was provided by a summer bussing program. A structured questionnaire, used to interview mothers in a randomly selected sample of 173 families containing school age children, was administered in the homes of respondents during July and August, 1966. Communication variables rather than social-psychological ones proved to be critical. These are: knowledge of the program; a school as the source of such knowledge; receipt of an application; receipt being from the school; and the involvement in other types of voluntary educational programs. (JM)

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SCHOOL BUREAUCRACIES AND FAMILY ACCEPTANCE OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS

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SCHOOL BUREAUCRACIES AND FAMILY ACCEPTANCE OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS.

A small but competent, concerned and humane band of citizens are working against time and other more tangible obstacles to evolve an educational program for the children of our cities which is conducive to their maximum growth and development. This paper will attempt to demonstrate the critical nature to such a program of an effective and efficient communication system linking school bureaucracies and the families which they supposedly serve.

Free universal education through high school graduation has become the accepted method in American Society through which the poor child receives the opportunity to become upwardly mobile and to move from poverty into the middle class. This choice appears to be based on three assumptions: 1) education enables the poor to develop the skills needed for full participation in the corporate society; 2) the patterns of thought and behavior required by today's technology are different from those learned by the child's parents; and, 3) the parents, especially in poor families, cannot supply the knowledge required by today's scientific and technological advancement but the public schools can and do.[1]

By the mid 1960's some prominent educators were expressing concern about the availability of comparable education for all children. It appeared to them that many of the nation's poor were ill-equipped by the

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[1]Elizabeth M. Eddy, Urban Education and the Child of the Slums. New York: Hunter College, 1965. Draft copy, p. 14.

schools to enter the current labor market and that this was not a matter of personal choice or inadequacy but a matter of physically deteriorating, badly run, poorly financed educational institutions in the slums of our cities -- especially the black slums.

With the kind of logic that has characterized the contemporary American stance in relation to the poor, this growing awareness of the bankruptcy of the big city educational bureaucracy was soon followed by a series of studies with the resulting plethora of books, reports, and articles. Most of those which caught the attention of the tax-paying public were concerned with the culturally disadvantaged child, the culturally deprived child, the socially disadvantaged child. The children and their families tended to be "blamed" for educational failure though little of this material was based on empirical studies of Negro families. The educational bureaucracy escaped with minor scoldings and once again "relevant, innovative, educational planning" was based on dicta rather than data.

The study which will be reported on in this paper is an empirical study which attempted to discover the nature of the families in a particular black ghetto and ascertain the critical factor in the decision of these families to either accept or not accept a particular educational opportunity for their children.

The community chosen was Hartford, Connecticut. The opportunity involved was a summer bussing program. In June, 1966 the West Hartford Board of Education invited the parents of school age children, living in Hartford's School District H, to enroll their children in a six-week

summer school program to be held in West Hartford. Within the total program 250 out of 1,250 slots were reserved for Hartford children. An estimate was made that as many as 8,000 children might be eligible for the program. School District H and Northeast Hartford are contiguous. It contains the majority of the city's non-white population, which amounted to slightly more than 15 per cent of the total city population.

Goals of the Study.

1. The study sought to provide some insight, based on empirical evidence, into the current life situations of non-white families of school age children living in a poverty area. Of particular interest were the values and attitudes that appear to affect their use of the educational system.

2. The study was concerned with ascertaining the extent to which socio-psychological factors operating within a family affected its use of a voluntary educational opportunity offered to its children.

Sampe and Instrument Used. A structured questionnaire containing 131 questions (only 4 open-ended) was used to interview mothers in a randomly selected sample of 173 families containing school age children. The interviews took place in the homes of the respondents during July and August 1966.

The Families of School District "H"

Although District "H" has been officially declared a "poverty area" and its children "poverty children", the data collected in this study do not present such a clearly unambiguous picture. The families with school age children represent a socio-economically heterogeneous though racially homogeneous population. Ninety-one per cent of the families were Negro;

thus the term non-white ghetto appears to be an accurate one to use in relation to School District "H".

The economic status of the sample families is rather complex. Depending upon the way you define poverty; one-third to one-half of the families were poor. When $4,000 is used as the poverty line, 33 per cent of the sample is poor. Using $4,000 as the base line, the average poor family has an income of $3,031 to support 5.5 members and the non-poor family has an income of $6,400 to support 4.3 members. When family size is considered as a component of poverty status, a District "H" family can have an income as high as $7,000 and still be poor. The range of incomes was from $1,582 to $30,000. The median income was $5,500 and the average income was $4,792. Family size ranged from 2 to 10 or more. The average family unit contained 4.7 members. Seventy-five per cent of the families are supported by an employed family member and 49 per cent of the mothers work.

The children in the poor families of "District H" are not necessarily "welfare brats" or children of uneducated, unskilled parents for 57 per cent of the poor families are supported by a working parent and 65 per cent of those employed are skilled workers employed as such.

Income and marital status are definitely related in District "H" -- 80 per cent of the non-poor family units contain two parents as contrasted to 42 per cent of the poor families.

Seventy-six per cent of the mothers interviewed were born outside of Hartford and 62 per cent migrated from the rural south after their eighteenth birthday. Although urban non-white poverty is often said to be related to in-migration from the South, the relationship did not hold for this

population--approximately the same percentage of poor and non-poor had migrated from the wouth at approximately the same age.

The majority of parents had had some high school education but most of this formal education had been received from racially segregated schools below the Mason-Dixon Line.

One of the clear-cut findings of this study was that the parents did have aspirations for their children which they could articulate in decisive terms. The aspirations were uniformly high and all of the mothers hoped that their children would have more education than they had received. Ninety-eight per cent of the respondents stated that they wanted their children to have at least some college education. An unexpected trend was one that indicated parents had higher educational aspirations for their sons than for their daughters. Poor mothers with sons were more apt to report membership in the PTA and other educational organizations than those who had no sons. For the educational system to function as though the majority of non-white ghetto parents are unconcerned about their children's future is to mis-read the facts. This mis-reading has led, at times, to an inappropriate use of scarcely allocated resources with exaggerated attention being paid to "motivating parents". Assessments regarding motivation might better be made after sufficient resources are available and accessible to those who have need of them. Aside from everything else, the people in District "H" who knew about the summer program also knew that only 250 children would be accepted into it.

The families of School District "H" proved to be heterogeneous with respect to economic stratification, formal and informal educational attainment, the distribution of abilities and personality traits,

educational and career goals, values and perceptions, family size and structure, community involvement and knowledge and use of the educational system. Aside from their humanity, the only elements common to most of the area residents are: 1) their skin color; 2) the perception that racial prejudice seriously, though not hopelessly, handicaps their children.

There is a growing awareness that many poor families cannot financially afford to take advantage of "free educational opportunities". There were families in District "H" who needed the money their children could earn "working in tobacco"; there were other families who could not afford to purchase the summer clothing they felt their children would need to learn in the suburbs. One of the important findings of Headstart is that many of the children are so malnourished and have such extreme iron deficiencies that they are physically unable to concentrate in school. It is, at best, difficult to follow through on what one is motivated to do if one is hungry.

A majority of the parents in School District "H" were educated in a very different educational system at a different time. In this instance the schools were southern rural segregated Negro schools -- in other instances it may be rural Mexican, Puerto Rican, Indian etc. schools. Many of the parents, consequently lack "know-how" as well as the "clout" needed to function adequately in the big city schools. There is often, for example, a complete misunderstanding of what course a child must take in order to be prepared for college. Many of the parents lack the most rudimentary knowledge of the working of the educational system as it operates in Hartford. Educated in the racially segregated schools of the rural South, many have not been socialized in a way that enables them

to deal effectively with the educational bureaucracy. Many of the parents have so little understanding of the relationship of education and employment that they are seriously handicapped if not hopelessly crippled in their attempts to help their children move toward their occupational goals.

Even when a parent has been properly socialized, he often, if not usually, has to operate without full knowledge of all the educational opportunities supposedly available to his child.

For far too long, despite egalitarian pronouncements in the United States, a good education has been viewed as a privilege one was entitled to because of birth, residence, financial status or special gifts. Recently, education has come to be viewed as the right of every child. It is to be feared that until education is viewed as neither a privilege not a right but a necessity for the common good to be provided by the total community the children of non-white poverty areas will remain at the tag end of the educational receiving line.

Variables critical to the acceptance of the opportunity.

Communication variables rather than social-psychological ones proved to be critical in the decision to accept or not accept the opportunity. These communication variables are: knowledge of the program; a school as the source of knowledge of the program; receipt of an application; receipt of an application from the school; and involvement in other types of voluntary educational programs.

Socio-economic variables contributed an infinitesimal amount to the variance between acceptors and non-acceptors. The poorest families are under-represented among the acceptors but income is not significantly

correlated with acceptance.

The parents in District "H" aspire to more education for their children than they themselves have had. They also hope for more financially and socially rewarding employment for their children when these children reach adulthood. The failure to accept the invitation to attend the summer school is more directly related to the fact the parent had not received the invitation, had an inaccurate or incomplete perception of the program, or had made other plans for their children than to a lack of concern about the education of the children.

Bussing was not a determent to acceptance -- 40 per cent of the acceptors state that their acceptance was at least partly due to the fact that the children would be bussed to the suburbs. Less than 15 per cent of the non-acceptors state or imply a negative reaction to bussing.

Statistical analysis[2] of the data indicated that there were no

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[2]Two sets of programs were used in the analysis of the material
(1) Kenneth I. Jones, Multivariate Statistical Analyzer (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1964), pp. 166-167. (Mimeographed.)
(2) Arthur S. Couch, Data Text System--Preliminary Manual. (Cambridge: Harvard University Department of Social Relations, November, 1966). (Mimeographed) Factor Analysis -- Section 12, Rotation Program -- Section 13, pp. 230-268, and Cross Tabulation Program -- Section 14, pp. 269-312.
The material was analyzed in the following manner using the previously stated program: 1) Frequency distribution with percentages, contingency tables and chi-squares were obtained; 2) a correlation matrix was constructed; 3) a factor analysis with orthogonal varimax and quartimax was made

In addition F and T tests were made on appropriate material.

significant differences along the dimensions of thirty-two variables. There were twenty-five variables that significantly differentiated the families who accepted the educational opportunity for their children and those who did not. It is possible to say, therefore, that the two groups are more alike than different.

More important for this study, however, than locating the variables which differentiated the acceptors and non-acceptors was ascertaining which of these variables was significantly correlated with acceptance. The correlates of acceptance, or more accurately, the correlates of non-acceptance were extrapolated by submitting all 59 variables to a factor analysis. The decision not to accept the invitation was highly correlated with not receiving an application from any source, not receiving an application from a school in the district and either having no knowledge of the program or having learned of it from a source other than a school. Prior use, by the family, of an educational opportunity program was also a correlate but much less significantly so.

When asked if they had received an application form inviting their child to attend the summer school program, 69 per cent of the mothers responded in the affirmative. When acceptors and non-acceptors are observed separately, an impressive difference between the two groups emerges. All of the acceptors reported having received an invitation as contrasted to less than half (37.6 per cent) of the non-acceptors.

The schools were the primary source of the application. The majority of respondents (64 per cent) reported that they had received their application from a school in District "H". The difference between

the acceptors and non-acceptors is again quite clear. More than nine out of ten (92 per cent) acceptors reported having received an application from the school as contrasted to slightly more than one out of three (35.3 per cent) non-acceptors.

When asked if they had ever heard of the West Hartford summer school program, 85.5 per cent of the respondents said they had. There is, however, a significant difference in the percentage of acceptors and non-acceptors who said that they possessed this minimal information. Approximately 2 per cent of the acceptors said that they had never heard of the program.[3] In contrast, over one-fourth of the non-acceptors (27 per cent) said that they were not aware of the program's existence.

When asked about the source of this information, approximately one-half (51.4 per cent) of the respondents said that they had learned about the summer school program from one of the schools in the district. There is a significant difference in the percentages of acceptors and non-acceptors who reported learning of the program from the schools. Two-thirds of the acceptors said that they had heard about the program from the schools but only one-third of the non-acceptors gave this response.

The decision not to accept the invitation to participate in the voluntary educational opportunity program is correlated with variables relating to the communication network developed by the school system to deliver the message about the program to the families rather than to

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[3]Two of the acceptors were grandmothers acting as temporary mother surrogates and had not signed the application. They indicated no prior knowledge of the program.

socio-psychological variables operating within the families. Prior involvement of the family with an educational opportunity fits in very well with the concept that communication variables are the critical ones. The family that has participated in one educational opportunity program would seem to be better prepared to receive messages about subsequent programs than one which has not. Not only would they tend to be better prepared to receive the message, they would also tend to be more knowledgeable about the way to respond to messages.

The finding that communication variables rather than socio-psychological ones are critical to the acceptance of an educational opportunity is extremely important. It is undoubtedly more feasible to establish an effective and efficient communication system between the schools and poverty area families than to establish a therapeutic program which would motivate all non-acceptors to accept. Americans take particular pride in their communication expertise. To work out an effective communication network linking poverty area schools and families would be a "Madison Avenue man's dream." The fact that the vast majority of poverty area parents are already motivated in the direction of getting the best possible education for their children should simplify the task considerably. An effective communication system appears to offer possibilities of creating a bridge that would span the social gap that exists between the poorest families and the schools.

The findings in this study appear to substantiate the conceptualization of Litwak and Meyer concerning the relationship of formal organization to primary groups. Their "Balance Theory" stresses in part, the importance

of establishing different types of communication systems between the schools and the different socio-economic sub-groupings of families served by the school. Their thesis carries an important, practical message for policy makers and social planners concerned with the provision of educational opportunities for children in a poverty area. Two points made by Meyer and Litwak that seem particularly pertinent to this discussion are: 1) "Where the social distance is great it is hypothesized that those mechanisms of coordination that permit the organization to take great initiative in contacting these groups will promote communication, otherwise selective listening may prevent the message from reaching the group for which it is intended." 2) To communicate across the boundaries of resistant primary groups, it is necessary to have intensive relations with primary group members in order to surmount barriers of selective interpretation and selective retention."[4]

Meyer and Litwak state that the only way to make certain that educational messages reach the families most widely separated from the schools is to use a personal messenger. This would be a person hired by the school, trained in the art of communication, and acting on behalf of the school in relation to specific programs. It has been demonstrated in this study that it was critical for acceptance that the family receive the message and that they receive it directly from the school. In a very real sense "the medium was the message". For some families it is extremely important that they hear loud and clear; from the schools -- We want you!

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[4]Eugene Litwak and Henry J. Meyer, "A Balance Theory of Coordination Between Bureaucratic Organization and Community Primary Groups," Administrative Science Quarterly, II, No. 1. (June, 1966), pp. 31-58.

Improvement in the communication network linking the school system to poverty area families appears to offer an effective and efficient method of involving additional poverty area families in educational programs by the "school bureaucracies".

The data gathered in this study indicate that poverty area families are concerned about the education of their children. The findings also indicate that the families tend to respond positively to opportunities presented by the school when information is communicated in understandable forms that reach them. What the data cannot tell is how motivated the schools are to reach the children of the poverty area and provide them with the best possible education. The message that is being conveyed to the parents in the non-white ghettos is that the Educational Bureaucracy has imprinted on its masthead in bold, clear, if sometimes invisible letters, "Fair Shares For All, But Fair Shares Are Not Equal Shares".

CD/s